

Shooting Sports Program Targets Youth

By Luann Dart

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Above: Ian Whitney practices as coach Darin MacDonald and teammate Ross Olson look on. The Ramsey County shooting sports program holds shotgun practice every Monday night through summer at Devils Lake Gun Club.

Below: Bob Staloch, a 4-H volunteer from Cass County, helps a young lady load a muzzleloader during a 4-H shooting sports camp.

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As the pheasant flushes, before adrenaline rushes, just before the trigger finger tenses, that's when a tranquil mind fully focuses on the target. It's a skill 16-year-old Ross Olson has mastered through the North Dakota 4-H shooting sports program.

The 4-H shooting sports program is the fastest-growing 4-H project in North Dakota, luring new faces, and reflecting the changing structure of the familiar 4-H cloverleaf.

Launched in North Dakota in 2001 as a pilot program in six counties, the 4-H program now teaches archery, rifle, shotgun, pistol and black powder shooting skills to youth in 37 counties and three reservations. While 700 youth participate through 4-H clubs, 4,700 completed training last year through 4-H camp, day camps and other venues.

Through North Dakota State University Extension Service, 4-H reaches youth not only in traditional clubs, but through school enrichment programs, independent study, after-school and special interest programs. Some 5,500 youth belong to 500 clubs in the state. Those enrolled in 4-H can choose from more than 120 projects in about 30 core areas. Kids ages 5-7 enroll as Cloverbuds, while those ages 8-18 are 4-H members.

And the addition of a shooting sports program has offered even more opportunities to 4-H youth.

North Dakotans' affinity for outdoor recreation naturally led to the addition of shooting sports to 4-H, explains Al Ulmer, 4-H shooting sports coordinator and LaMoure County Extension Service agent. It's such a natural fit.

"We are a hunting and shooting state. We're an outdoor state, so obviously a larger majority of our kids are going to be attracted to activities that relate to the outdoors," said Joe Courneya, North Dakota State University Extension Service education program design specialist.

A lot of kids are looking for something beyond video games in the mall, said Jim Carter, North Dakota Game and Fish Department hunter education coordinator. "I think this program is great and it can provide a springboard for youth," he said.

Carter said the 4-H program dovetails with the Game and Fish Department's hunter education program, which 6,000 North Dakotans completed last year. Sixty-five percent of the participants were ages 11-16.

And the 4-H program has created an upswing in the number of teens, particularly boys, who are both joining 4-H and continuing their membership. "If you take a bow and arrow someplace, the kids will surround you," Ulmer said. "Here's a project that kids flock to."

Triggering Talent

While Ross Olson has become a better marksman, he's developed other skills through the 4-H shooting sports program, including safety, ethics and lifelong skills. Youth ages 8-19 can enroll in the program, which integrates life skills and builds self-confidence better than any other 4-H project, Ulmer said. "This program is designed to teach kids to be successful when they're shooting," he said. "Our major goal is to have a youngster throw something down range, whether it's an arrow or a bullet, and be successful while having fun."

But it also teaches other skills.

"The whole business of shooting sports goes beyond hunting," Carter said. "You learn a lot of things in that endeavor – discipline and control and respect."

Research has shown that kids who go through the program do better in school because they learn to concentrate, Ulmer said. They learn how to block out outside, static noise.

The 4-H program focuses on teaching life-time skills, and shooting sports continues that ideal. "It's one of those few things you can carry on through your whole entire life," Ulmer said.

It also connects youth to North Dakota, a vital link when they start choosing careers. "North Dakota has some wonderful resources, and that's the outdoors, whether it be sitting on the shores of Lake Sakakawea or sitting at the gun club shooting at targets," said one instructor, Dan Driessen, Devils Lake. "I see that as a hook for keeping kids in North Dakota. We have an out-migration problem right now with our youth and I think if we can show them what North Dakota has to offer in terms of our outdoor experiences and our natural resources, I think we have a chance of keeping kids here."

Aiming to Succeed

As the clay target flies across the prairie, the keenest eye, steadiest hand and most tranquil mind will shatter the target in seconds. Four young men have honed those skills well enough to win the North Dakota 4-H shooting sports state match in the shotgun competition and will travel to Rapid City, South Dakota, in June for the national competition.

Ryan Olson, Ross Olson, Ian Whitney and Matt Pflaum, all of Devils Lake, will represent Ramsey County in the national team competition, shooting 100 rounds of sporting clays, 100 rounds of trap and 100 rounds of skeet during the three-day event. An archery team from Fargo will also compete. It's at the national competition where the top shooters will earn college scholarships or begin Olympic aspirations.

Driessen launched the 4-H shooting sports program, geared to ages 11-17, in Ramsey County two years ago. Instructors teach trap, skeet and five-stand sporting clays to advanced classes and basic shotgunning to beginners. Youth are required to attend the first three sessions, when safety and ethics are taught. They learn line commands, where the shotgun muzzle should be pointed, when to load, and other skills.

Fifteen youth practice shotgun skills every Monday night through summer with coaches Doug Darling, Norm Howard, Lee Dannenberg, Darin MacDonald and Driessen. "One of the unique things about the shooting sports program compared to other 4-H program areas is the most comprehensive volunteer training system," Courneya says.

Volunteer coaches are certified through a 12-hour session by instructors who have completed national certification. All 4-H shooting sports instructors must complete the training before working with youth. Training not only covers shooting skills, but risk management, how to work with and train youth. About 375 volunteer leaders have been certified through the training program in North Dakota.

"Anytime you work with kids, the rewards are endless," said Driessen, who was one of the first instructors in North Dakota to become certified in 2001. "It's amazing. The smiles on their faces are amazing."

"All of our kids are interested in the outdoors. It's just a matter of who's going to expose them to the outdoors," Driessen added. "Sometimes they don't get that opportunity. This is a way to provide them an outreach for the outdoors. You're not going to find a better place to enjoy the outdoors than North Dakota."

As the youngest member of the team, Ross Olson, 16, has been a 4-H member for 11 years and is also the state archery champion. "I was shooting prior to that and I decided I wanted to be involved in something like that," he said of the 4-H shooting sports program. An avid hunter, not only has Ross become a better marksman, but his concentration has improved. "You have to stand there and wait for it and anticipate the bird coming out and hitting it; lots of patience."

Youth may join 4-H through a traditional club, as a family or through a special interest club.

While Ross is a longtime 4-H member, Matt Pflaum, 18, the oldest member of the



The 4-H shooting sports state championship shotgun team includes (left to right) Ryan Olson, Ian Whitney, Ross Olson and Matt Pflaum. The Ramsey County team members will test their skills at the national event in Rapid City, South Dakota, in June.

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team, joined 4-H two years ago just to be involved in the shooting sports program. "I like it; it gets me ready for goose hunting," he said.

The four teammates have bonded and even gather for hunting excursions, testing their skills in real situations. "Overall, I think we've seen quite a few life skills develop in them," Driessen said. "We see some leadership skills."

A friendship that goes beyond hunting has developed between teammates, said parent Cindy Olson. "The program is unbelievable ... I'm glad for it," she said. "My boys gave up sports so it gives them a team to work with. This is their extracurricular activity."

Ulmer has heard that story before when another mother thanked him for providing a sporting activity in which her son could excel. "With the shooting sports program, you don't have to be 6 foot 6 inches and you don't have to be 250 pounds," he said. "You don't have to be able to run. We have people of all shapes and sizes. We can pretty much accommodate any child."

Shooting puts everybody on the same playing field, Driessen agrees. Nobody's at a disadvantage.

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**To learn more about the
4-H shooting sports program,
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